

Prevalence

Child abuse linked to faith or belief is a hidden crime, which makes it difficult to quantify in terms of magnitude. Cases have been recorded worldwide across various communities and religions including Christians, Muslims and Hindus. Abuse may happen anywhere, but is most commonly within the child's home.

The Children in Need Census 2016/7 identified 1,460 cases where the assessment of the child's needs showed child abuse linked to faith or belief as a possible factor (Department for Education, 2017)

Signs that a child could be at risk of abuse linked to faith or belief

- Children who are seen as "naughty" or have challenging behaviour
- Children with disabilities including autism, epilepsy, down's syndrome, dyslexia.
- Albinos, precocious children and left handed children
- Children whose parents have been branded as witches
- Children living away from home in private fostering situations or in domestic servitude situations
- Children who are living within complex family structures e.g. a polygamous setting or a reconstituted family

Signs the a child is undergoing abuse linked to faith or belief

Most of the indicators may appear similar to other types of maltreatment and include when a child:

- Reports that they are or have been accused of being evil, and / or that they are having the devil beaten out of them.
- Is made to wear some form of paraphernalia that could be of a religious nature.
- Personal care deteriorates or has body marks, such as bruises or burns
- Is seen as the scapegoat for a change in family circumstances for the worse
- In a group of children is relatively powerless vis-a-vis the parents/carers, maybe a child with no essential role in the family
- Attendance at school becomes irregular, or is taken out of school altogether without another school place having been organised

The law and abuse linked to faith or belief

There are not specific laws in in the UK regarding child abuse linked to faith or belief

What to do if you suspect a child is at risk of abuse linked to faith or belief

If you are worried about a child, you should follow your normal safeguarding procedures, ensuring you mention you are concerned the child may be a victim of abuse linked to faith and abuse and the reasons why you are concerned.

You can also contact the Metropolitan Police's Project Violet on the non emergency, 24/7 number: 101

If you are concerned that the girl is in immediate danger, contact the police by calling 999.

You should also contact the Foreign and Commonwealth Office if the child has been taken abroad:

- telephone: 020 7008 1500
- from overseas: +44 (0)20 7008 1500



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For more information about any aspect of the Centre's work, please contact the National FGM Centre:

✉ info@nationalfgmcentre.org.uk

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Child abuse linked to faith or belief An overview



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Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Abuse

There is a variety of definitions associated with abuse linked to faith or belief. The National Action Plan includes the following. The concept of belief in:

- witchcraft and spirit possession, demons or the devil acting through children or leading them astray (traditionally seen in some Christian beliefs),
- the evil eye or djinns (traditionally known in some Islamic faith contexts) and dakini (in the Hindu context);
- ritual or multi murders where the killing of children is believed to bring supernatural benefits or the use of their body parts is believed to produce potent magical remedies;
- use of belief in magic or witchcraft to create fear in children to make them more compliant when they are being trafficked for domestic slavery or sexual exploitation.

Abuse can be separated into five different areas;

- Abuse as a result of a child being accused of being a 'witch'
- Abuse as a result of a child being accused of being possessed by 'evil spirits'
- Ritualistic abuse which is prolonged sexual, physical and psychological abuse
- Satanic abuse which is carried out in the name of 'Satan' and may have links to cults
- Any other harmful practice linked to a belief or faith

This is not an exhaustive list and there will be other examples where children have been harmed when adults think that their actions have brought bad fortune.



Health implications of Abuse linked to faith or belief

Physical: This can involve beating, burning, cutting, stabbing, semi-strangulating, tying up the child, or rubbing chilli peppers or other substances on the child's genitals or eyes.

Emotional: Emotional abuse can occur in the form of isolation. A child may not be allowed near or to share a room with family members, and threatened with abandonment. The child may also be persuaded that they are possessed. The act of telling a child that they are possessed by an evil spirit or told that they are a witch can be emotionally abusive.

Neglect: In situations of neglect, the child's family and community may have failed to ensure appropriate medical care, supervision, education, good hygiene, nourishment, clothing or warmth.

Sexual: Children who have been singled out in this way can be particularly vulnerable to sexual abusers within the family, community or faith organisation. These people exploit the belief as a form of control or threat. Children could also be subject to practices through the deliverance process that are sexually abusive e.g. having to be bathed undress in the presence of others. Trafficked children from some countries have been known to be subjected to practices designed to control them. Some of these practices involve using their pubic hair and undergarments in rituals.

"Child abuse is child abuse, in whatever language"

Det. Supt. Terry Sharpe, MET Police



"Justifications" for Abuse linked to faith or belief

Evil Spirits: Belief in evil spirits that can 'possess' children is often accompanied by a belief that a possessed child can 'infect' others with the condition. This could be through contact with shared food, or simply being in the presence of the child.

Scapegoating: A child could be singled out as the cause of misfortune within the home, such as financial difficulties, divorce, infidelity, illness or death.

Bad Behaviour: Sometimes bad or abnormal behaviour is attributed to spiritual forces. Examples include a child being disobedient, rebellious, overly independent, wetting the bed, having nightmares or falling ill.

Physical Difference/Disability: A child could be singled out for having a physical difference or disability. Documented cases included children with learning disabilities, mental health issues, epilepsy, autism, stammers and deafness.

Gifted and uncommon characteristics: If a child has a particular skill or talent, this can sometimes be rationalised as the result of possession or witchcraft. This can also be the case if the child is from a multiple or difficult pregnancy.

Complex family structure: Research suggests that a child living with extended family, non-biological parents, or foster parents is more at risk. In these situations they are more likely to have been subject to trafficking and made to work in servitude.

(Source: MET Police, Online)

"In order to save the child, to get the evil out of them, or to stop them from being witches, the parents or the church will exorcise them. To them they are not starving or beating the child, but the spirit that is inside them."

(Oladapo Awosokonwre, AFRUCA)